

The Irish High Cross

An Exhibition of High Cross
Replicas and other Irish Early
Christian Treasures

Exhibition guide

museum

National Museum of Ireland
Ard-Mhúsaem na hÉireann





The Irish High Cross

The Irish High Crosses are monumental stone crosses. There are at least two hundred known in Ireland. They are found primarily on early monastic sites, where they occupied a central position or marked the boundaries of sacred spaces. The Irish High Cross series is derived from similar crosses in English and Scottish monasteries with which the Irish Church had close ties.

The crosses are carved from one or more blocks of stone and are noted for the ring that encircles the arms and upper shaft. The ring would originally have served to support the arms of the cross. The majority can be dated by means of their style and occasionally by inscriptions to the ninth and tenth centuries A.D.

The crosses display a number of decorative panels. It is thought that the earliest stone crosses were copied from prototypes in timber, or from composite crosses of wood and metal. The decorative panels on the stone crosses mimic metal plates on processional crosses, a late example of which is the Cross of Cong. Later High Crosses have figure sculpture illustrating themes from the bible and gospels. The decorative panels on the crosses may have been painted.

Introduction

High Crosses communicated the teachings of the Early Christian Church to a largely illiterate population. Set in ecclesiastical settlements, the High Crosses depicted scenes from the Old and New Testaments. The wealth of decoration on the crosses attested to the political and economic importance of some ecclesiastical communities during Ireland's Golden Age.

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries a growing awareness of national identity led to an increased interest in archaeology. In Ireland the wealth of the Irish Golden Age was becoming more and more apparent. Through numerous Industrial Exhibitions and the international exchange of reproductions of archaeological objects, museums succeeded not only in educating their domestic audiences but broadcasting the wealth of their respective nation's archaeological heritage. Of all the Irish reproductions manufactured at this time, the most impressive are the plaster casts of the Irish High Crosses, copies of which were exhibited in England, America and Australia.

Conclusion

The casts of the High Crosses commissioned by Col. Plunkett were prominently displayed in the Centre Court of the National Museum of Ireland in Kildare Street for much of the earlier part of the 20th century. Later they were removed to the entrance hall of the museum, before finally being placed in storage in the late 1970s to make way for other visitor services.

In recent years the National Museum of Ireland, continuing a tradition of exhibiting reproductions as tools of education, sent a selection of High Cross casts for exhibition to Nagoya, Japan. Once more the exemplary artistry of Early Christian Irish monasteries was educating peoples, although now through the medium of 100 year old plaster. 2007 sees the first viewing of the casts in Ireland in over 30 years.





North Cross

Ahenny, Co. Tipperary.

The North Cross is one of two High Crosses from Ahenny. It dates to the 9th century and is representative of the early series of cross manufacture. This series relied on non-figurative art unlike the later High Crosses which concentrated on figure sculpture depicting biblical and gospel scenes.

The only figure sculpture on the North Cross, Ahenny, occurs on the base. The scenes depicted may be interpreted as:

- God with outstretched hands naming animals (east face)
- Goliath's headless body being escorted to Jerusalem (south face)
- The risen Christ sending his apostles on their mission (west face)
- A scene of a chariot procession (north base)

The figure sculpture on the crosses conveyed the teachings of Christianity but also contained aspects of the contemporary world of the stonemasons. Differing styles of dress and hair are evident along with depictions of chariots and processional crosses in use at the time.

Plaster cast of North Cross, Ahenny, Co. Tipperary

Between 1898-1908 Col. G. T. Plunkett, Director of the then Dublin Museum of Science and Art commissioned the reproduction of a number of Irish artefacts. A select number of High Crosses were chosen for the exemplary sculpture and stylised motifs they exhibited. The plaster cast of the Ahenny Crosses were made in 1906 by a London-based Italian modeller Sig. Orlandi.



South Cross

Ahenny, Co. Tipperary

The South Cross like the North Cross dates to the 9th century. The head and shaft of the cross are dominated by decorative motifs that are highly reminiscent of processional crosses of the period.

The figure sculpture on the South Cross is confined to the base. The scenes on the south, west and north faces all show aspects of hunting. The east face of the base shows is partitioned and shows Daniel accompanied by two lions, beside which, seven figures represent Christ and the apostles.

Plaster cast of South Cross, Ahenny, Co. Tipperary.

The plaster cast of the Ahenny High Crosses are comprised of four pieces; the base, the shaft, the head of the cross and the cap stone. It appears that a limited number of casts could be made from the moulds. Contemporary accounts mention moulds which 'only bear about four casts'. The cost of making the moulds of the two Ahenny crosses was £151, with each cast being produced at a cost £35.



Tall Cross

Monasterboice, Co. Louth.

This 9th century cross is the tallest in Ireland and displays the largest number of panels of figure sculpture on any High Cross. It stands almost 6.5m in height.

The east face displays (from head to base):

- A scene of a seated figure
- Christ walking on water
- David, King of the Israelites
- The scenes on the arms depict St Anthony tempted by demons (left) and St Paul and St Anthony overcoming a devil (right)
- An angel shielding the three children in the fiery furnace
- Elijah ascending to Heaven with a chariot and winged horse
- Samson pulling down the pillars of the house
- David holding Goliath's impaled head and Samuel anointing David
- Moses drawing water from a rock
- Abraham sacrificing Isaac
- David killing the lion

The west face displays (from head to base):

- Pilate washing his hands
- St Peter with a drawn sword
- The crucified Christ
- The scenes on the arms show Judas betraying Christ (right) and the soldiers mocking Christ (left)
- The soldiers casting lots for Christ's garments
- The risen Christ
- Christ giving a key to St. Peter and a book to St. Paul
- The three women at Christ's tomb
- John The Baptist baptising Christ
- Christ lying in the tomb

The south face shows two scenes from the life of John the Baptist; John as an infant being carried by his parents and the naming of John.

The north face shows scenes depicting David on the throne of Israel and Daniel in the lion's den.

Plaster cast of Tall Cross, Monasterboice, Co. Louth

The Tall Cross at Monasterboice was cast in 1901, over a period of 3 months at a cost of £161. 16s. 10d. The Tall Cross was the first cross to be cast after the contentious 1896 casting of Muiredach's Cross. During the 1896 casting, concerns were raised in parliament that iron tools were used to remove lichen from the cross, this was later disproven.



Photography by Dr. Peter Harbison

Muiredach's Cross

Monasterboice, Co. Louth.

Muiredach's Cross dates to the 9th century and is regarded as the finest example of crosses depicting scriptural scenes. The cross derives its name from the Irish inscription on the west face of base.

OR DO MUIREDACH LASNDERN...RO

Prayer for Muiredach who had the cross erected

The east face displays (from head to base):

- St Paul and St Anthony defeating the devil
- Christ seated in heaven
- Christ and the Last Judgement
- St Michael weighing the souls
- The three Magi or Wise men at the birth of Christ
- Moses drawing water from the rock
- David departing from Saul (left) and David defeating Goliath (right)
- Adam and Eve (left) and Cain slaying Abel (right)
- Unidentified scene of lions, centaur and two kneeling figures

The west face displays (from head to base)

- Christ ascending to heaven
- The crucifixion of Christ
- The scenes on the arms show Peter denying knowledge of Christ (left) and the resurrection of Christ (right)
- Christ giving St. Peter a key and St. Paul a book
- Christ raised from the dead
- The second mocking of Christ

The south base shows a scene of a horseman and an angel and a second scene of a huntsman. Pilate washing his hands is depicted on the end of the south arm.

The north base displays a hunting scene.

Plaster cast of Muiredach's Cross, Monasterboice, Co. Louth.

Muiredach's Cross cast in 1896, was the first of the High Crosses from which moulds were taken. Sig. Orlandi took five weeks to complete the casting, at a cost of £59.11s.10d. Casts of Muiredach's Cross were sent to The Victoria and Albert Museum, London and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Requests for casts also came from the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, the Irish Industrial Exposition New York (1905) and the London Franco-British exhibition (1908).



Drumcliffe Cross

Drumcliffe, Co. Sligo.

The High Cross from Drumcliffe dates to the 11th or 12th century. It bears a number of unique features including two animals in high relief.

The east face displays (from head to base)

- The second coming of Christ and the Last Judgement
- Daniel in the lion's den
- David slaying Goliath
- Adam and Eve

The west face displays (from head to base):

- The crucifixion of Christ
- The return from Egypt or the circumcision of John the Baptist
- The second mocking of Christ
- The naming of John the Baptist

The ends of the arms show Mary holding the Christ child on the south face and the north arm is occupied by an animal.

Plaster cast of Drumcliffe Cross, Drumcliffe, Co. Sligo

Casting of this cross commenced on the 5th June 1907, after consent had been granted by the Board of Works on the 15 May 1907. The works were conducted at a cost of £75 and supervised by a Mr. de Sales.



Photography by Dr. Peter Harbison

Dysert O'Dea Cross

Dysert, Co. Clare.

The Dysert O'Dea cross dates to the 12th century. It belongs to the later series of cross manufacture. This later series is dominated by high relief figures of the crucifixion and bishops or patrons. The Dysert O'Dea cross is comprised of two sections, both display characteristics of the same school of masonry. However, the union of the two sections may not have been the original design of the cross. The cross and its base were positioned on a stone plinth at a later date.

The east face displays (from head to base):

- The crucified Christ
- A bishop/abbot with a pointed mitre. The hole where the right arm should be suggests that a secondary piece was to be inserted
- Inscription:

THIS CROSS WAS NEWLY REPAIED BY MICHAEL
O DEA SON OF CONNOR CRONE O DEA IN THE
YEARE 1683

The west face displays

- Adam and Eve

The south face displays

- Inscription:

REERECTED BY FRANCIS HUTCHINSON SYNGE OF
DYSART FOURTH SON OF THE LATE SIR EDWARD
SYNGE BART AND MARY HELENA HIS WIFE IN THE
YEAR 1871.

- Daniel in the lion's den

The north face displays

- Unidentified scene on the base.

Plaster cast of the cross from Dysert, Co. Clare.

The Dysert O'Dea cross was cast in 1908 and was one of the last crosses to be copied. In light of escalating costs and the departure of the modeller Sig. Giuntini the casting of High Crosses ceased. As the era of Industrial Exhibitions and World Fairs came to an end at the beginning of the 20th century so too did the exhibition of plaster reproductions.



museum

National Museum of Ireland
Ard-Mhúsaem na hÉireann